

## ON HOLOCAUST DENIAL (I)

i.e. who says the Holocaust never happened and why do they say it?

Genocide denial =

- a) The **most common way to deal with genocide** and crimes against humanity. Here, the Holocaust is actually rather the exception than the rule. West Germany, though initially quiet, accepted responsibility and has since attempted to remedy the genocide (through commemoration, reparation payments, etc.). It was, however, not always a common way to deal with genocides, ancient rulers tended to celebrate their eradications of entire peoples. Denial is, as it seems, a modern phenomenon.
- b) According to many scholars, denial is **“the final stage of genocide”** (remember, for example, Gregory Stanton’s 10 stages of denial, the 10<sup>th</sup> being denial?).

Today’s agenda:

- **What is denial?** Why deny genocide in general, and the Holocaust in particular?
- **Terminology:** denial, “negationism”, revisionism, trivialization, whitewashing, obfuscation – what should it be called and is it the same thing?
- **Who denies?**
- **When did it start?**
- **Where is the Holocaust being denied? How does it look?**
- **Why do people deny the Holocaust?**

First, however, a look at: **The Montel Williams Show**, an episode from **1992** [the episode in its entirety can be found on Youtube – beware the quality of the clip though]. Context.

Deniers: **Mark Weber** and **David Cole**. Both are unusual deniers in one sense (Weber has a master’s degree in history from Indiana University, and Cole is Jewish), but very common and mainstream deniers in another sense. “Poster boys” for Holocaust denial.

### Clip 1:

The show invited Weber and Cole because they held some kind of entertainment value, naturally, but also because they, as they had put it when trying to get historians to participate, wanted to “show both sides of the debate”.

This is a common misconception. Genocide denial, and in this case Holocaust denial, is not “the other side” of a scholarly debate (it’s not, Holocaust scholars deal with “why, what, who, when” – deniers deal with “if”, and that’s not really relevant anymore as the Holocaust has been “proved” beyond doubt). Denial barely deals with history at all.

Denial – another genre or just bad historical writing? Adheres to its own conventions and rules. Example: historians (in the best of worlds) tend to ask the question, look at the evidence and *then* answer it – deniers starts with the answer, only to manipulate and distort whatever evidence they find.

Is denial PSEUDOHISTORY?

Pseudo = looks like one thing, is another. I.e. looks like history, is not history.

So: deniers are not writing the history of the past, they're denying the past while making it look like they're writing legitimate, scholarly history.

Many people have preconceived notions of what Holocaust denial look like: crude, overtly racist and antisemitic, loud, fringe individuals etc. BUT, this is what the fairly modern denial looks like.

- This Montel Williams Show-episode was eventually not aired, presumably because both Weber and Cole were made to look too good, because the host nor any of the guests really knew anything about history or the Holocaust.
- Things happened, but not in the way that we usually think they did ("although certainly not a country club"): disease, starvation, overcrowded camps, the chaos of war.
- Extermination was not the intention.
- "Revisionist", not denier.

#### WHAT TERMINOLOGY SHOULD WE USE?

- **Denial:** is originally a psychological term (coined by **Freud**) referring to a regular and everyday-occurring defense mechanism. We use it, as a matter of routine every day, and as a defense mechanism, denial is perfectly normal. We see denial all around us (+example), and it's evident that we use denial in order to deal with circumstances in life that makes us feel uncomfortable or anxious. We tell ourselves, and others, that things are fine when they aren't, and it is these self-deceptive white lies of denial that keep us going. Denial is a day-to-day transactional business. It's just routine. When we talk about genocide or Holocaust denial, however, we talk about something else. Part of it is denial that has been stepped up a notch or two, where the defense mechanism turns into a self-deceptive refusal to accept significant, life-changing realities that are obvious to the world at large. (Example: Thabo Mbeki and the South African government's denial of HIV-AIDS: up until 2006 they maintained that HIV was not a serious problem in their country, explaining that AIDS was actually an illness that could be cured by garlic, beetroot and lemons). Historical denial, of which genocide and Holocaust denial seem to be part of, turns this self-deceptive denial towards the past. In the case of Holocaust denial towards the Holocaust. It does not fit their world view, and hence the routine thing to do is deny. Denial is, however, a problematic term or word to use when describing the activities of deniers. Denial is a) descriptive, b) polemic (i.e. calling someone a denier implies that you do not only reject what they do and say, but that you think that they are *consciously* lying). Denial is also largely a psychological concept, and perhaps not useful when analyzing an entire phenomenon.
- **Denialism:** umbrella-term referring to denial of genocide as a large phenomenon – compare nationalism, Nazism, communism etc. (implies a world view). A better term as it implies denial as a sociological phenomenon rather than a psychological. Culture of denial!
- **Negationism:** Used in reference to French deniers especially, originally a French term. Share issues of "denial" – polemic.

- **Apologism**: emphasizes the defensive nature of denial. Often refers to people trying to reinstate or excuse Hitler and the Nazis, doesn't necessarily include denial of the Holocaust. Some settle for arguing the Hitler was right in killing the Jews.
  - **Revisionism**: is actually *the ultimate* scholarly activity (re+vision). Deniers call themselves revisionists as a means of keeping up a veneer of scholarly legitimacy. There is, hence, legitimate scholarly Holocaust revisionism (asking why the Holocaust happened) and illegitimate Holocaust revisionism (asking if it happened at all).
- Weber: accommodating, clear, rhetorically sharp.
  - Cole: presented as a victim.
  - Facts, objectivity, truth.
  - The 6 million figure – symbolic and a good target. (In fact, Weber criticizes the 6 million figure for being faulty. Then he admits that no serious Holocaust scholar would argue that 6 million is the final and correct number, then he criticizes scholars for the fact that the death count varies – a disagreement that in effect would add credibility to the 5-6 million death count historians do put forward)
  - Other people died as well.

### Clip 2:

- Uses current interest in the Holocaust to trivialize the historical event.
- “The gas chamber controversy”
- “Show us the evidence” – then: “it has to pass my personal skepticism”.
- Details are central.
- Sweeping judgments of historical Holocaust research, rarely backed up by concrete examples or names.

I've structured the remainder of today's lecture as a **Q&A session**. I've, modestly, posed some questions to myself – and you're more than welcome to ask any questions that come to mind.

### WHAT IS DENIAL?

Complex issue and question. Psychological denial vs. sociological denial.

Denial is of course literature – books, articles, editorials, reviews, monographs, guides, pamphlets and promotional materials – as well as You Tube-videos, conferences, speeches and rallies. But it's also a **genre** (with its own rules and regulations), and a **phenomenon**.

Denial vs. **conspiracy theories**. Most deniers of the Holocaust emphasize **the Holocaust “lie”, the “six million swindle” and the “Jewish conspiracy”** to dupe the world into giving Jews in general, and Israel in particular, money and sympathy.

Similar to most conspiracy theories, Holocaust/genocide deniers, adhere to different **world views and ideologies** (ideas that tell them what the past was like, what the present is and what the future should be). To most (though apparently not to all) Holocaust deniers, that world view is based largely on **antisemitism**; the main conspiracy is Jewish, and the Holocaust is, according to deniers, the tool through which they hope to gain world domination. As to

people arguing e.g. that the world is flat, these conspiracy theories do not go well with scientific or historical evidence, eyewitness testimonies, or common sense.

As opposed to arguing e.g. that the world is flat, however, Holocaust denial has unfortunate and negative consequences: hurtful, furthers antisemitism. Of more importance, however, Holocaust denial, and genocide denial in general, is often referred to as **the “last stage” of genocide**. Following the physical destruction of a people and their material culture, memory is all that is left and is targeted as the last victim. Complete annihilation of a people requires the banishment and suffocation of memory. Falsification, deception, and half-truths reduce what was to what may have been or perhaps what was not at all. **Senseless terror gives way to reason, violence adapts to explanation, and history is reshaped to suit a contemporary agenda**. The process of annihilation is thus, some would claim, advanced and *completed* by denial.

This world view explains some aspect of denial, though not all of it.

**Some aspects of denial/denialism are always the same, regardless what genocide is denied:**

1. **Hostility by the majority of deniers towards a particular ‘other’ or group of ‘others’**. That is to say, they are, as individuals and as groups, bigoted; indeed, in some cases, they are deeply prejudiced to the point of showing intense hatred. (“us and them”)
2. The second consistency is **the attachment of deniers to outrageous beliefs**, an attachment that appears to defy all logic and seems only to increase in intensity as yet more evidence comes to light that contradicts the denialist position. Historians and other scholars have, in light of this, simply concluded that deniers are misguided, racist idiots. That the illogic behavior of deniers is to clutch at straws, and that it doesn’t matter how much evidence is presented in favor of the Holocaust. To some extent, that’s probably true. But it’s more to it than that. **FESTINGER** (US psychologist): *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957). Festinger argued that **the self seeks internal consistency of beliefs**, but, if faced with two competing belief systems, a way of solving of this uncomfortable state of mind may be sought by rejecting one system and increasing adherence to the remaining one. E.g. Hitler is thought to be good, but evidence and historians say he was not → cognitive dissonance. Solution: cling to your original position even more fiercely: Hitler was a saint, and nothing you say can prove me wrong.
3. **Form, style, and strategies**.
4. **Defensiveness**, wanting to save or reinstate something.
5. In cases of historical denial: the more traumatic the event, the more determined the denial.
6. Historical denial **deals with the past**. It is, however, **not historical research** and study as we know it. Scholars: from question, to sources, to conclusion. Deniers: from conclusion, to sources, to question.

HOLOCAUST DENIAL, however, has quirks of its own as well. Unlike other cases of denial, which are usually rather pragmatic or to do with defending one’s national or political character (example: Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide), Holocaust denial seems to be without such a function. Most Holocaust denial seems, only, to be based on delusion and hatred, and in some rare cases the will to reinstate Nazism as a viable political and ideological

alternative – although most Holocaust deniers argue that their main agenda is getting to the truth, of telling people what “really happened”.

## **WHERE, WHEN AND WHY DID IT START?**

Holocaust denial draws its inspiration from a variety of sources.

**Long-term causes:** antsemitism etc.

**Short-term causes/inspirations:** a legitimate historical tradition that was highly critical of government policies and believed that history was being used to justify those policies, the age-old nexus of conspiracy theories etc.

Holocaust deniers **maintain themselves that they are heirs to a generation of American revisionist scholars** who were critical to the traditional interpretation of WWI. These WWI revisionists were a) critical of the American involvement in the war, b) critical of the guilt that had been placed on Germany.

In this sense, Holocaust deniers saw a kindred spirit, or so they thought. Early deniers were, too, critical of the Allied forced and wanted to exonerate, to excuse, Germany. In reality, however, the two “revisionist schools” were not alike. One was scholarly, legitimate (i.e. followed the rules and conventions of the historical science: didn’t fabricate evidence, was critical of evidence, did not settle upon a conclusion before the study had even been made), the other pseudo-scientific and scholarly illegitimate.

After WWII, some American scholars once more began to argue that Germany was not solely responsible for the second war either.

+ in Europe, former and exiled SS-men began to deny the Holocaust, often in an attempt to cover up what would turn out to be their own involvement in it.

By 1950: the foundations had been laid for those who would not simply settle for relativizing of minimizing Germany’s actions in the war. Some people would, from 1950 and onwards, argue that the atrocities that had taken place in Nazi-Germany during the war had never even happened.

At the end of war, in 1945, most rational people assumed that Hitler’s defeat meant the end of Fascism as an ideology. As long as Fascism could be linked with Nazism, and Nazism, in turn, could be linked with the Final Solution, then both would remain thoroughly discredited. There were those, however, who were not willing to abandon these political systems. They knew that the only means of trying to revive them would be to separate them from the Holocaust and other atrocities that accompanied it.

Nowhere was this effort more evident than in **France**, where Holocaust denial found some of its earliest advocates. French Fascists were among the first to deny the Holocaust.

Example: **Paul Rassinier**.

Spread to the US and other parts of Europe (including Sweden).

Early Holocaust denial was largely **crude, simple and limited**. It largely consisted of accusations rather than argumentation.

Examples of early Holocaust denial: Austin App, David Hoggan. [SHOW BOOKLET]  
**WHAT HAPPENED TO DENIAL DURING THE 1970S?**

As the question reveals, something happened during the 1970s that makes that particular decade crucial in the history of Holocaust denial. During the 70s, Holocaust denial changed. Holocaust deniers did not act in a vacuum and were hence influenced by what happened during the 70s.

Important events and processes during the 70s:

- Cold War
- Vietnam war
- Human rights movement
- Women's movement
- Increased interest in the Holocaust and other genocides and crimes against humanity
- A new philosophy of history entered the arena.

## → POSTMODERNISM

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, most historians agreed that history had become an objective science, that historians were able to be free from bias, and present the past as it had happened once.

Writing history was hence very straightforward, present the facts and let them speak for themselves. Historians thought that they discovered history, much like chemists discovered different elements in nature. During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, however, historians began to question this. Maybe historians didn't simply describe the past "as it had happened". What if historians instead created a version of the past, and the history that they wrote were an answer to questions they had posed to the past and the material?

Historians began to question the possibility of being truly objective (that is, to free oneself of every bias), and the possibility of reaching the historical truth, "as it had actually happened", was doubted. Philosophers of history argued whether history is what happened in the past, or if it is what we *think* happened in the past. Professional historians, therefore, differed between "the past" and "history". Everyone (or, nearly everyone) agreed that the past had happened, but that when we put it back together, by using hundreds or even thousands of little bits and pieces that survived, it is always a version of the past constructed by the historian in question.

Issues like these were, to professional historians, matters of theory. They did not generally question whether or not the past had actually existed, but only if we as historians really *can* reach an altogether true and comprehensive account of the past. **Deniers, on the other hand, took these theoretical debates and argued that regular historians did not believe in objective scholarship, or the truth, anymore** – but they did! And in order to prove that they did, they had to look the part. Hence, the APPEARANCE of Holocaust denial was drastically changed during the 70s.

Example: Arthur Butz, Richard Harwood, David Irving (who I'll talk about in a minute).

During the **1970s, Holocaust denial was PROFESSIONALIZED**. Deniers such as Butz, holding a PhD in another subject were well-versed in Western academic conventions, made denial look scientific.

Holocaust denial books suddenly included: hard covers, proper publishers (that they often set up themselves), footnotes, pictures, a bibliography, and – most importantly – critique of *other* Holocaust deniers. Hence, deniers now attempted to present themselves as “revisionists” representing the “other side” of a legitimate scholarly debate.

## ONWARDS

- 1978: **Institute for Historical Review** (David McCalden). *Journal of Historical Review* – scholarly sounding and seeming. Conventions.
- 1979: IHR announced that they would pay a reward of 50,000 dollars to anyone who “could prove that the Nazis operated gas-chambers to exterminate Jews during WWII”. Attention. The Mermelstein case.
- IHR further made a name for itself by attempting to advertise in college newspapers in the US during the 1980s.

## WHO DENIES?

- State-sponsored denial (e.g. Iran?).
- Groups, organizations, collectives (e.g. IHR).
- Individuals (e.g. early Holocaust deniers, App, Hogger and others).

**Similarities?** Men, non-academics, academics, some are scholars of the natural sciences (computing, physics, chemistry etc.), anti-Semites, Neo-Nazis (or other organizations of the extreme right), good speakers.

All in all, however, individuals denying the Holocaust are rather different, joined together by a common antisemitic ideology.

1. Nazi revivalists
2. Extremist Islamist political and religious propagandists

Perhaps easiest to talk about different cases of Holocaust deniers:

David Irving (VIDEO!)

- No more paradoxical character in the Holocaust denial movement.
- He aspires to respect and recognition of other historians, while occasionally scorning them for their inability to see in his work the value he perceives there.
- 1977: *Hitler's War*
- Before that: a respected historian, though not trained, he had never studied history. Books on the bombings of Dresden, on Churchill during the war etc.
- In *Hitler's War*, Irving's most controversial book, he argued that Hitler didn't know about the Holocaust. If he had, and when he learnt of it, he tried to stop it. He had no proof to support this, and he was scorned by legitimate historians.
- In close contact with IHR and other extreme right organizations.

- Became, after 1977, more extreme.
- Made an absolute name for himself when he sued **Deborah Lipstadt** in 1996 because she had described him as “one of the most dangerous deniers of the Holocaust” in one of her books. The case went to trial, and Irving lost. Judge: no historian!
- Today, probably the most well-known of the Holocaust deniers.

Why do people like Irving then deny the Holocaust?

## **WHY DO PEOPLE DENY THE HOLOCAUST?**

Other cases of genocide denial (Turkey etc.): matters of national security, fear of economic compensation, legal reprimands, still perpetrators active within the state bureaucracy.

Answering why people deny the Holocaust is more complex. Legal reprimands have already been settled (by putting those responsible before a court), economic compensation has been paid etc.

This doesn't explain why individuals in North America, Europe and the Middle East deny the Holocaust. In the case of the Middle East, however, (and especially IRAN) much Holocaust denial has, by scholars, been explained by **attitudes towards contemporary Israel**. Denying the Holocaust has, among some groups, become a strategy of disagreeing with Israeli politics.

The kind of denial we've been talking about today, though, mainly settled in the US, Canada, and Western Europe (there's naturally Holocaust denial in **Eastern Europe** as well, especially in counties where Communism was the direct inheritor of Nazism, and where one traumatic history was swiftly replaced by another. In many of those counties the Holocaust was for a long time both absent and denied, as a way of coping with the immediate Communist past), is, clearly, based on other causes.

**Main reason: IDEOLOGY and WORLD VIEWS** (and the course has, here, almost come full circle: starting with antisemitism, and ending with the very same).

Running through almost all denier literature is a fascination with Jews and anything and everything Jewish. No issue of the *Journal of Historical Review*, for instance, fails to include something on Jews (content analysis: revisionism, Holocaust, equivalency, Nazis, WWII, Jews, Fascism = 90%, all of it implicating the Jews or matters of Jewish interest and history).

This is, for sure, where the conspiracy-part of Holocaust denial offers a good explanation. Conspiracies are based on world views, and world views help us make sense of the world around us. Hence, if you think Jews are attempting to take over the world, you're building your world view on antisemitic opinions and values. To deniers, therefore, this makes sense: Jews are bad, and they want to take over the world, and the reason they want to take over the world is because they're bad.

Added to this world view, or ideology, is the psychological matter of **cognitive dissonance**.

+ there's further what scholars have identified as “the psychology of extremism”. Common to all types of extremism really, but especially relevant in cases of Holocaust denial.



1. **Absolute certainty they have the truth.**
2. The belief that the world is controlled to a greater or a lesser degree by a conspiratorial group. The one thing an extremist needs more than anything else is an enemy.
3. Open hatred of opponents. Because these opponents (actually enemies in the extremists' eyes) are seen as a part of or sympathizers with "The Conspiracy", and they deserve hatred and contempt.
4. Little faith in the democratic process. Mainly because most believe "The Conspiracy" has great influence in government, and extremists therefore scorn and shun compromise.
5. Willingness to deny basic civil liberties to certain fellow citizens, because enemies deserve no liberties.
6. Consistent indulgence in irresponsible accusations and character assassination.

It has been argued that people adhering to this psychology of extremism tend to not want to play the game. Rather, they want to change the rules. That's what Holocaust deniers have attempted to do.

They would not be able to prove or even argue their point if they had to adhere to historical, scholarly rules of conduct and investigation, and so: they change the rules. Instead of, for instance, changing your conclusions because new evidence or sources came to light, deniers choose to manipulate those sources and sticking to their pre-conceived conclusions.

#### **+ EXTREMISM as a way of life!**

American sociologist **Daniel Bell** wrote once, insightfully, that: "The way you hold beliefs is more important than what you hold. If somebody's been a rigid Communist, he becomes a rigid anti-Communist – the rigidity being constant."

That's also very much true for Holocaust deniers, and helps somewhat to explain odd cases such as Paul Rassinier or David Cole. Rassinier had been a devoted Communist only to become a devoted antisemite, Cole had been involved in pretty much every extremist organization in existence in North America, only to become a devoted Holocaust denier. The devotion, rigidity and extremism remained unchanged.